
ELECTRONIC DICTIONARIES AND ESP STUDENTS

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Abstract:

This article presents the results of an experiment conducted on two distinct groups of students attending our ESP classes in the academic year 2009-2010. The first group was formed of second year students majoring in business and the second group first year students majoring in computer science. The experiment involved presenting the students with a list of traditional dictionaries as compulsory course bibliography and a list of free electronic and internet dictionaries as additional resources in an attempt to prove that, irrespective of their major subject, most students prefer freeware dictionaries for their usefulness, currentness and user-friendliness; that is why they should be taught how to use such resources appropriately. The students were asked to build personal glossaries of technical terms (in business and computer science, respectively) and indicate two dictionaries they had used and found most useful. 85% of the Business students and 99% of the computer science students declared their preference for free electronic resources and dictionaries. Our conclusion was that students should be encouraged to use free electronic and internet dictionaries as well as participate in terminology-related discussions in forums and linguistic communities to improve their English.

Keywords: *dictionary, reference tools, electronic dictionaries, printed dictionaries, ESP*

1. Introduction

Dictionaries have been defined as alphabetical lists of words followed by pronunciation information, definitions, and etymology. "A dictionary is a reference book about words. It is a book about language. Its nearest cousin is the encyclopedia, but this is a book about things, people, places and ideas, a book about the 'real world', not about language [...]. Dictionaries are reference books. People consult them to find out information about words." (Jackson 21, 22). These valuable reference tools are normally referred to as lexicographical products in the form of a book, but most language learners and linguists are aware of the benefits of electronic dictionaries. According to Y.V.Chon, electronic dictionaries are extremely useful in the ESL/EFL class, during reading activities but especially during writing tasks: "Writing particularly favours the use of electronic dictionary resources since, in educational contexts where

computers are easily available with World Wide Web connections" (23). It is true, as Chon argues that dictionaries are useful when the mental lexicon is surpassed by linguistic challenges in an ESL/EFL context, but the student - especially in an ESP context - is also interested in double-checking their terminology, and the electronic dictionary provides them with the possibility to make this a pleasant and painless possibility. Not only does the electronic dictionary work faster than any other "traditional" reference tool, but it also absolves the user from the tedious task of browsing through a huge alphabetical (printed) list of words over and over again.

It is true that electronic dictionaries are fast but sometimes they are regarded as less reliable than their printed counterparts, even though a dictionary is, by definition, a limited resources (Walker 298). Most electronic dictionaries are facing huge quality problems, but the selection process should always involve careful testing and comparison. Some electronic dictionaries, such as those provided by Merriam-Webster ("Merriam-Webster Online"), Cambridge ("Cambridge Dictionary Online: Free English Dictionary and Thesaurus - Cambridge University Press - Cambridge Dictionaries Online - Cambridge University Press") and Word Web ("WordWeb: English dictionary, thesaurus, and word finder software."), are more reliable than what students might find in libraries. Nevertheless, there are some which should be carefully used, as their developers are constantly changing the database which threatens their reliability: dictionar.ro ("Dictionar - roman, englez, francez, german, spaniol, italian") or dictionare.com ("Dictionar Englez Roman - English Romanian Dictionary Online"). The price "factor" is always important and, in most cases, electronic dictionaries are free.

The idea of this experiment emerged from the need to provide our students with a list of reliable reference tools which are both cost-effective and easy to use. That is why we decided to selected only those reference tools that were readily available – for free – from the Internet or the University library. Starting from the assumption that "the relationship between dictionary use and language learning is a constant" (Campoy Cubillo 206), we decided to conduct this experiment in an ESP context because of the fact that most language learners – including ESP learners – expect their instructors to provide them with the necessary terminology and refrain from using a dictionary because, in most cases, they are not able to find a word in a particular dictionary or to accurately interpret its definition. Interpreting a definition is of crucial importance as "A dictionary does not describe a language, but give information" (ten Hacken 417). Even if electronic dictionaries are subject to the same treatment, they solve a problem that printed dictionaries have not yet managed to solve: their copy/paste function (see Word Web) prevents the user from misspelling a word and saves time by inserting or replacing the right word in a text.

2. The Experiment

Given the fact that dictionaries are usually considered familiar tools, undergraduate students assume that they know how to use a dictionary even if that is not always the case. In most situations, students use first the dictionaries

recommended by their teacher or instructor as compulsory reference tools and, if they do not find a specific word, they resort to using the internet. Using the internet, which seems even more familiar than traditional dictionaries, causes more trouble than it is actually able to solve, because most students do not actually know how to use it in order to improve their language skills.

Even when they talk about using the internet to find words and discover their meanings, most of them are sure that they can address the search engine as if it were a human ready to answer all their questions. That is why “looking up a word” became synonymous with finding web pages containing a specific word. Experienced users of the internet behave almost similarly, even though their searching abilities are significantly better in the sense that they are more familiar with search algorithms and rules.

Our experiment involved two groups of upper-intermediate students attending ESP classes, of which 50% were experienced internet users. The first group was formed of 20 second year students majoring in business (Group 1) and the second group of 20 first year students majoring in computer science (Group 2). We started from the assumption that all students possessed some knowledge of the internet and thus they would be able to use the internet resources and dictionaries recommended as learning aids. Both groups were given short lists of bilingual and monolingual dictionaries and a set of internet or downloadable dictionaries as additional resources (see Table 1) being instructed to use those they find more appropriate and reliable. However, we emphasized the fact that, in general, printed dictionaries were considered more reliable than their freeware electronic counterparts. As a course assignment, students were supposed to build their own glossary/dictionary of technical terminology and state, after having completed the assignment, which dictionary they found more useful and user-friendlier.

Given the fact that, in general, students use dictionaries on a regular basis and they consider them familiar and accessible tools, they were not given any instructions on how to use these reference tools or on how to interpret the information they find in them. They were instructed to bring their glossary notebooks to every class and take down all technical words they consider important to their field of study in the texts read in class or those included in their reading assignments. They were also instructed to include in the definitions all information required for an accurate understanding of the use and meaning of that particular word: a short definition, a synonym, a short example or even a translation.

As the main aim of this experiment was to see whether students prefer electronic and internet resources to traditional reference tools, we did not refer in this study to the definitions and information included in the students' glossaries; we should add, however, that in most cases students included in their glossary entries at least one equivalent in their mother tongue for each term, especially for those in the technical vocabulary; there were also cases in which the students included a sentence illustrating the use of their term, especially for phrases and expressions.

	Group 1		Group 2	
	Printed Dictionaries	Free Electronic/Internet Dictionaries	Printed Dictionaries	Free Electronic/Internet Dictionaries
1	Bantaș, A. Năstăsescu, V. <i>Dicționar economic englez-român, român-englez</i> , Ed. Niculescu, București, 2003.	WordWeb Free Dictionary and Thesaurus (freeware): http://wordweb.info	<i>Dictionar Tehnic Englez-Român</i> , Ed. Tehnica, Bucuresti, 2004	WordWeb Free Dictionary and Thesaurus (freeware): http://wordweb.info
2	Ionescu-Crutan, Nicolae, <i>Dicționar economic englez-român, român-englez</i> , Ed. Teora, București, 2006	The Merriam-Webster Free Online Dictionary and Thesaurus: http://www.merriam-webster.com/	<i>Dictionar Tehnic Român-Englez</i> , Ed. Tehnica, Bucuresti, 2001	The Merriam-Webster Free Online Dictionary and Thesaurus: http://www.merriam-webster.com/
3	<i>Dictionar Englez-Român</i> , Ed. Univers Enciclopedic, București, 2008	Cambridge Dictionaries Online (free access): http://dictionary.cambridge.org/	<i>Dictionar Englez-Român</i> , Ed. Univers Enciclopedic, București, 2008	Cambridge Dictionaries Online (free access): http://dictionary.cambridge.org/
4	<i>Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English</i> , Third Edition, Longman Dictionaries, 1995	Free Online Dictionaries: http://dictionary.com/english/	<i>Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English</i> , Third Edition, Longman Dictionaries, 1995	Free Online Dictionaries: http://dictionary.com/english/
5	<i>Webster's Universal College Dictionary</i> , Gramercy Books, New York, 1997	Free Online Dictionaries: http://dictionar.ro/	<i>Webster's Universal College Dictionary</i> , Gramercy Books, New York, 1997	Free Online Dictionaries: http://dictionar.ro/

The criteria considered during the selection of the printed dictionaries in Table 1 were: availability (all printed dictionaries are available in the university library) and reliability (all printed dictionaries in the list were published by recognized Romanian or

international publishing houses). The online dictionaries were selected after a close analysis of their reliability, speed and user comments. WordWeb Free Dictionary and Thesaurus was selected as one of the best freeware dictionaries on the market; it is downloadable from the website indicated in the table and it may be used offline. Most electronic dictionaries provide the user with the possibility to hear the pronunciation of the word they look up; this is probably one of the reasons why the majority of students preferred electronic over printed reference tools.

The other two electronic dictionaries, The Merriam-Webster Free Online Dictionary and Thesaurus and the Cambridge Dictionaries Online need no introduction as they are established competitors on the internet market. One of Merriam-Webster's strong points is the fact that it is more than just a valuable online dictionary, i.e. it provides the user with several other useful sections, such as "New Words and Slang," "Word of the Day," "Word Games," which proved to be very popular among the students participating in the experiment. On the other hand, Cambridge Dictionaries Online, even though they do not have specific sections focused on language learning and vocabulary acquisition (of the "Word of the Day" type, for example), provide the user with a full set of dictionaries: Advanced Learner's, Learner's, American English, Idioms and Phrasal Verbs comparable, in terms of reliability, to their printed counterparts. The Cambridge Dictionary of American English was mainly used by students in Group 2, because of their main interest in computer-related terminology and research articles written by American authors. Students in Group 1 found the online Cambridge Dictionary of American English extremely useful when their reading assignments included texts written by American authors.

The majority of students in Group 1 (86%) admitted that they first used the printed technical dictionaries, but afterwards, they switched to the online reference tools. Their reason was mainly ease of use and speed, only 10% of the members of Group 1 adding reliability to their list of reasons. All students in Group 2, probably due to the fact that they were majoring in computer science, started used exclusively the online reference tools, admitting that they looked up a few words in the printed dictionary mainly out of curiosity and to double check their online dictionaries.

The most frequent "problem" the students had to face, according to their own comments during the groups discussion held after the completion of this assignment, was that sometimes they were not able to find all words in one dictionary and thus they were forced to use multiple sources. Another issued they had to deal with during the experiment was internet connection; most of them declared that, of all the electronic dictionaries, Word Web was the most efficient because it worked well offline too.

3. Conclusions

ESP students prefer electronic reference tools which they find cost-effective and reliable (most of them are free or affordable). Teachers and instructors should

select electronic reference tools and test them for reliability, user-friendliness and availability. ESP students regard dictionary use as a useful activity as it teaches them how to look up words and how to interpret the definitions they find. Students should be encouraged to double-check their findings with a monolingual dictionary because electronic bilingual dictionaries are still in development, and thus reliability is not always their main positive quality. In most cases, students course work does not involve translation so a monolingual dictionaries is usually enough. Students should be encouraged to use a thesaurus to avoid repetition during writing tasks (the Word Web thesaurus is a reliable tool) to avoid repetition. Electronic dictionaries are especially useful during writing tasks, as the words may be copied and then pasted into an electronic document without worrying about spelling or typing errors (Word Web has a "copy" and a "replace" function which was highly appreciated by students in both groups).

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